Playwright Philip Kan Gotanda’s new role — UC Berkeley professor

After 35 years in the spotlight as a prominent Bay Area playwright, Philip Kan Gotanda is tackling perhaps his most challenging role yet — college professor.

The Berkeley playwright famed for his explorations of Asian-American history and identity — from the Japantown drama "After the War" to "The Wind Cries Mary" (an Asian twist on "Hedda Gabler") — is now a tenured professor at UC Berkeley’s department of theater, dance and performance studies, a program that has employed such distinguished artists as Spalding Gray and Tony Taccone in the past.

A groundbreaker who dealt with Asian-American themes on stage long before it was fashionable to do so, he hasn’t put away his artist shingle, however. The 64-year-old continues to write plays and to make independent films, but these days he spends most of his time nurturing the next generation of artists and scholars. That desire to shape the future and connect it with the bones of the past has long been a hallmark of his career.

"Philip’s quiet demeanor belies a huge passion for the world, for social justice and for unheard voices, for love and storytelling," says Carey Perloff, artistic director of San Francisco’s American Conservatory Theater. "Working with Philip has been one of the highlights of my time at ACT. His writing is so spare, so specific, so alive and so muscular. I adore the way he can fill in an entire world with very few strokes and give dignity and depth to his characters in such surprising ways."
No one was more surprised than Gotanda, who grew up in Stockton and tried his hand at law and music before turning to the theater, that academia turned out to be a perfect fit. But the pioneering playwright’s gentle demeanor, intense work ethic and insatiable curiosity have helped him make the transition from stage to ivory tower.

“I never thought I wanted to teach, but I found that the world changed and I changed too,” says the soft-spoken playwright. “I love being here. I enjoy the intellectual rigor and I enjoy the students. I find them smart and intellectually open and without that sense of self-entitlement I feel at some campuses.”

Although the prolific writer was initially reluctant to give up producing his own work full-time, the scholarly life has grown on him. Economics also played a part. Although his work has been staged everywhere from ACT and the now-defunct San Jose Rep to the Manhattan Theatre Club, making a living as a playwright and filmmaker was always a tall order. The short commute to the Berkeley hills home shares with his actress-producer wife Diane Takei is also a plus.

Besides, says Gotanda, “I find it rejuvenating. What’s especially refreshing is that it’s not all about me, my work, my career. Rather, it’s all about the student and how you can help him or her learn. It’s a great relief.”

For the record, those who know him are not surprised by his flair for teaching because he has always taken time out to tend to young voices, to graciously share his insights and offer advice.

“Philip has always been an amazing mentor — he looks for younger artists to support and nurture and knows how to guide writers toward richer work,” says Perloff. “He has already made a huge impact there by exploring his own new work with undergraduates and by encouraging different departments and different kinds of artists to collaborate.”

Gotanda’s natural fluidity with form and theme, as well as his bravery about grappling with racial stereotypes, has inspired intense devotion. His fascination with the dark side of racial politics was partly sparked by tales told by his parents, who were interned during World War II.

“He broke open the idea of what an Asian-American playwright could write about,” says playwright Christopher Chen (“The Hundred Flowers Project”), who considers Gotanda an inspiration. “He’s a boundary pusher and he’s innovative, but he always innovates with style … . This fluidity of genre, sense of adventure and challenge and elegance of aesthetic are things I aspire to. He helped show me that an Asian-American writer could do all those things and not just be an ‘issues’ writer.”

Certainly the playwright has always resisted labels and limitations in favor of forging ahead into the unknown. From the brutal surrealism of “A Fist of Roses” to the cheeky soap opera of “Love in American Times,” Gotanda has never been afraid to abandon his comfort zone.

“Experimentation keeps me fresh, it keeps me on my toes,” he says. “There are students here who thumb their noses at what came before and I welcome that. I embrace new points of view.”


Philip Kan Gotanda
Age: 64
Hometown: Berkeley
Occupation: Playwright, UC Berkeley professor
Claim to fame: Gotanda is said to have created one of the largest bodies of Asian-American themed plays, films, even music in existence.
Quote: “After so many years of being self-absorbed with my own work, it’s a moment of wonder to teach, to give to someone else. Your ego can wear you down and it’s nice to throw that off.”

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Karen D’Souza
Karen D’Souza is the theater critic for the Mercury News and the Bay Area News Group papers. She is a three-time Pulitzer juror, a former USC/Getty Arts Journalism Fellow and a longtime member of the Glickman Drama Jury and the American Theatre Critics Association. She has a Master’s Degree in Journalism from UC Berkeley. She is a Twitter addict (@KarenDSouza4), a fangirl
and a mommy and her writings have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Miami Herald, the San Francisco Chronicle and American Theatre Magazine.